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Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

13 February 1985

**Soviet Counterinsurgency Tactics in Afghanistan:
Trickling Down to the Client States?**

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Summary

Accumulating evidence suggests that the Soviets may be attempting to pass on lessons they have learned during five years of counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan to their client regimes fighting insurgents in Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua. The Soviets have developed innovative tactics, most of which employ Spetsnaz and airborne troopers supported by MI-24 gunships and SU-25 aircraft, to effectively attack the Mujahedin. Although none of the Soviet client states has as yet fielded forces approaching this caliber, we see signs that more rigorous training and an increase in deliveries of armed helicopters and ground attack aircraft to these countries may lead to a more aggressive prosecution of Soviet-style counterinsurgency warfare by indigenous forces.

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Digesting the Lessons of Afghanistan

Certain counterinsurgency tactics being employed in Soviet client states in Africa and Central America resemble those used by the Soviets themselves in Afghanistan. These tactics, although used on a smaller scale than in Afghanistan, may be an early indication that the Soviets are trying to pass on lessons learned in counterinsurgency warfare. We cannot yet make this judgment with great confidence because we know so little about the identities and personal history of Soviet advisory personnel serving abroad; we know of none with combat experience in Afghanistan, nor can we confirm that any Soviet special forces (Spetsnaz) personnel are serving in the client states.

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Most importantly, the tactics used in Afghanistan seem to be generic to modern counterinsurgency operations: they were originally developed by the former colonial powers and the United States. Nevertheless, they are an innovation for the Soviet armed forces, which traditionally favor large-scale operations with rigid command and control systems, and have proved to be effective when used in conjunction with the newer Soviet weapon systems.

Senior Soviet officers have for some time recognized the need for more flexibility at the lowest levels of command in order to exploit fully the potential of modern combined-arms operations. Soviet field commanders in Afghanistan have responded by making tactical innovations that have greatly improved the combat effectiveness of some of their units. These techniques require highly trained and motivated troops supported by large numbers of helicopters, attack aircraft, and artillery. The Soviets have come to rely on Spetsnaz and airborne troopers--with a strength of about 2,400 and 11,000 respectively, roughly ten percent of the Soviet force in Afghanistan--supported by MI-24s and Su-25s to achieve the desired results. The Mujahedin have developed a healthy respect for these units but remain generally contemptuous of regular Soviet troops. Even though small-unit tactics have demonstrated superior effectiveness, the vast majority of Soviet combat operations in Afghanistan continue to be stereotyped large-scale campaigns that reflect Moscow's interference in day-to-day operations, the high level insistence on minimizing combat losses, and a rigid command and control structure.

Innovations in the Field

Among the combat techniques we have observed in Afghanistan that have a high potential for use in other counterinsurgency wars are:

-- Heliborne assaults. Airmobile teams of Spetsnaz and airborne troops carried by MI-8 helicopters and supported by MI-24 gunships have become the most effective Soviet tactic used against the insurgents. By positioning their toughest and most reliable troops on advantageous terrain or in blocking positions, the Soviets have forced insurgent units into exposed positions where they are more vulnerable to airstrikes and artillery fire.

-- Hunter-killer teams. The Soviets have employed armed helicopters in pairs or flights of four to flush out undisciplined insurgent units. The teams were first equipped with armed MI-8s, but as the ground threat increased, MI-24s were pressed into service. We have recently observed

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heavier teams of MI-24s and SU-25 attack aircraft using similar tactics to bring more firepower to bear against the insurgents.

-- Commando tactics. Spetsnaz teams have been used on extended reconnaissance-and-ambush missions of up to ten days. Commando patrols have been most effectively employed against infiltration routes. The deployed team is free to attack a small group of insurgent smugglers, but is expected to call for air, artillery, or airmobile support to attack a large force. Heliborne commando tactics also have been employed against insurgent strongholds in mountainous terrain.

-- Innovative uses of airpower. The brief high-altitude bombing campaign by TU-16s and SU-24s in conjunction with the latest Panjsher Valley sweep has not been repeated, but formations of tactical fighters and armed helicopters--sometimes exceeding 50 aircraft--have been used to beat down insurgent air defenses. Airborne relay aircraft have been used to provide communications connectivity to units in remote mountain areas.

-- Improved close-air-support. The Soviets are steadily increasing the numbers of MI-24 helicopter gunships and SU-25 ground attack aircraft in Afghanistan. Forward air and artillery observers have been integrated into some Soviet units down to company level in an effort to reduce response time and improve the accuracy of supporting fire. Some armed helicopters now are permitted to respond directly to urgent requests from ground commanders. More aggressive tactics, including the use of multiple axes of attack, have been observed periodically.

-- Upgrading intelligence. The Soviets--recognizing that success in counterinsurgency operations depends upon the availability of accurate, timely intelligence to field commanders--have continued to improve their intelligence collection, analysis, and response capabilities since entering the war. Their latest effort in this area was the establishment of a joint command post at Bagram to improve the quality and timeliness of their reporting to combat commanders.

Similarities in the Client States

For the most part, the Soviet client states lack the resources--particularly the skilled troops--to apply the counterinsurgency tactics effectively, and the Soviet's ability to supply them--short of introducing their own military units--is limited. Nonetheless, there is evidence that changes are occurring in the organization, equipment, and tactics of the counterinsurgency efforts in Angola, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua that may be at least a pale reflection of what the Soviets are trying to do in Afghanistan.

In Angola:

-- We have observed a consolidation and reorganization of the effort against UNITA since the return of former Defense Minister Iko Carriera from two years of training in the Soviet Union. We believe Carriera was responsible for dividing the nation into military regions for a more effective regional approach to the conflict, and for advocating the formation of 2000-man commando units in each region. Although the commando units suggest a parallel to the use of Spetsnaz in Afghanistan, we are unable to ascertain the

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degree of Soviet influence on this effort. Commando tactics were widely used by the Portuguese prior to their departure, and leftist Portuguese mercenaries were brought to Angola to train at least the initial 2000-man class.

-- In 1984, the Soviets delivered eight SU-22 ground attack fighters in addition to increasing the number of MI-25 (the export version of the MI-24) helicopter gunships to about 24. The SU-22s have yet to see action, but combined Cuban and Angolan crews reportedly have used MI-25 hunter-killer tactics against the insurgents. Lack of spare parts and trained technicians keep most Angolan aircraft on the ground.

-- The Angolans have designated a few "air assault" brigades, but since there are too few helicopters available to lift a unit of this size, we suspect that the designation is primarily wishful thinking. Special intelligence has indicated that the Angolans have conducted some small airmobile reconnaissance and blocking operations, however.

In Ethiopia:

-- [redacted] Ethiopians with the assistance of Soviet advisers are training elite units with special uniforms. We have been unable to confirm such training, but small-unit operations have predominated in the northern territories since the failure of the 1982 offensive there. Ethiopian patrols seldom remain in the field for more than two days.

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-- The Ethiopians have used MI-25s to attack insurgent positions, but we have no indication of the tactics employed. They too are plagued by poor maintenance and logistics support that limit their operational rate to 50 percent or less.

In Nicaragua:

-- The Sandinistas have begun to conduct long-range commando patrols into the northern border areas to disrupt insurgent base camps and interdict supply routes. Whether these patrols were suggested by the Soviets and Cubans, were copied from Salvadorian and Contra tactics, or were the natural response to the local situation is unknown.

-- The Sandinistas have received a few of the ubiquitous MI-25s. Only a handful are presently operational, but these have already been used against insurgent positions and infiltration routes.

-- MI-8 armed helicopters are being used to transport irregular troops into battle, lift forces into blocking positions, and provide close-air-support to engaged units. The small numbers of MI-8s available for counterinsurgency operations has limited their effectiveness, however.

Steps to Improved Effectiveness

The future effectiveness of these tactics depends in large part on other areas in which the Soviets have experimented in Afghanistan--improving close air support coordination, communication links, and intelligence support. While we have observed some investment in these areas by Soviet clients, none have been sufficiently improved to permit local forces to exploit fully their new tactics. In addition, all three client states would require more aircraft--both helicopters and fixed-wing ground attack types--in order to replicate the degree of mobility and firepower the Soviets feel is essential in Afghanistan. Maintenance and logistics support, now most frequently

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performed by Soviet and Cuban advisers aided by a handful of local talent, also demands attention.

Perhaps the single most important performance criteria remains the training and reliability of the combat forces. The Soviets and their clients use short-term conscript armies to fill out the bulk of their forces. The Soviets themselves assign Spetsnaz and airborne units--the best available in Afghanistan--to the most demanding tactical situations. Soviet client states, whose armies are plagued by high rates of desertion and exhibit generally poor morale, have no units that approach the caliber required for aggressive small-unit operations. The possibility exists that Moscow might turn to Havana to fill this void either by providing more rigorous training to local forces or by assigning Cuban troops to a more active role in combat. To date, however, Cuban units generally have been reluctant to engage in counterinsurgency operations.

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